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SUBJECT: VENEZUELAN REFERENDUM UPDATE-AUGUST 3, 2004

Classified By: Abelardo A. Arias, Political Counselor, for Reason 1.5 (d)

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Summary  
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1. (C) Supporters of President Hugo Chavez and the National Electoral Council (CNE) conducted separate voting simulations August 1, while the opposition Coordinadora Democratica rallied supporters to sign its Governance Accord and verify electoral registry entries. Each side of the referendum question remains convinced of its inevitable victory two weeks prior to the August 15 Presidential recall referendum. One prominent political analyst, however, told the Ambassador August 1 that Chavez's poll upswings had peaked and the opposition's standing was improving. End Summary.

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Sunday Political Events  
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2. (U) The Coordinadora Democratica (CD) August 1 organized 8,500 booths close to voting centers throughout Venezuela staffed by 50,000 volunteers. Voters verified the electoral register to insure they were registered and whether the location of the voting center to which they are assigned for August 15 is correct. The opposition also collected signatures in support for its "Governance Agreement", unveiled July 25, which outlines the directives of a possible transition government if Chavez is voted out of office. Statements by various opposition leaders indicated that the simulation went well.

3. (U) Supporters of President Hugo Chavez conducted a referendum vote simulation August 1 to familiarize people with the voting procedures and to check voters, electoral register information. The Chavez supporters said the purpose of the simulation was also to continue promoting the achievements of the Bolivarian revolution, and to assess the effectiveness of Comando Maisanta, the organization in charge of Chavez's campaign. Regional organizers and National Assembly representatives who support Chavez issued general statements that they were pleased with the results.

4. (U) Also on August 1, the National Electoral Council (CNE) held a logistical test to analyze the efficiency of material distribution and reception, operations, technical support, and transmission of results for the computerized electoral machines. The trial included 8,000 voting machine operators (out of 45,000), 1,000 technical supporters (out of 4,000), 300 supervisors and 50 control operators from CANTV, the Venezuelan telephone company whose lines will be used to transmit the electronic results of the Referendum. CNE vice-president Ezequiel Zamora said that Organization of American States (OAS) and Carter Center (CC) representatives were present. Zamora qualified the tests as satisfactory and told reporters that he did not foresee logistical problems during the Referendum. Zamora told reporters that as a result, he downgraded his level orange alert about possible Referendum delays to yellow.

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Win or Lose?  
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5. (C) Each side on the recall referendum continues to believe it will win the vote August 15. Political analyst and El Universal columnist Carlos Blanco told the Ambassador August 1, however, that he believes the opposition would win the recall referendum by 10%. Blanco said Chavez appears to have peaked in July, and a poll conducted at the end of the month by Felix Seijas coming out the first week of August will show Chavez dropping. Blanco also noted there are indications of Chavez supporters making plans to get their families out of the country, signaling that Chavez supporters are aware that their prospects are waning. Blanco argued that Chavez cannot realistically expect to gain more votes than those that brought him into office in 2000 -- 3.8

million votes, whereas the opposition had obtained 4.7

million signatures in its signature drives. If anything, he said, the number of persons who would vote for Chavez has diminished because of the President's failure to deliver. Carter Center representative Francisco Diez told the Ambassador that Chavez supporters believe they will win by 12-14%. Chavez opponents, using reasoning cited by Blanco, believe they will win by 10%, according to Diez. The Carter Center representative would not predict which side was correct in its estimation.

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CNE Contingency Planning  
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16. (U) The CNE failed to meet August 2 to begin evaluating contingency plan proposals to be implemented if there are voting machine failures on August 15. Three versions of draft rules for resolving possible problems are under consideration. CNE vice-president Zamora hopes that any problems that arise and cannot be resolved within an hour will lead to a manual vote. CNE Legal Counsel Andres Brito proposes a 2-hour lapse time and a decision issued by the National Electoral Board (JNE) to determine if a change to manual voting should occur. CNE president Francisco Carrasquero supports suspending the voting process at a center if technical failures cannot be resolved within an hour and resuming the voting there only if the votes in question would have significant bearing on the election results. CNE Director Jorge Rodriguez suggested July 30 that if there are failures in 20% of the voting machines, the referendum should be postponed. Coordinadora Democratica representatives oppose Carrasquero's proposal and rejected Rodriguez's suggestion as anti-democratic.

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Opposition Leader Dies  
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17. (U) Opposition negotiator at the 2003 OAS talks and National Assembly deputy Alejandro Armas died July 31. Armas was a former Chavez supporter turned opposition leader in early 2002. He led the Solidaridad political party. Armas was also a possible candidate for the opposition's transition government if Chavez were to loose the Referendum. Shapiro

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